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# THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

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## THE ORIGINS OF THE GOSPELS—A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE

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### Part I. The Synoptic Gospels—*Continued*

#### 2. The Witness of the Gospels, or Internal Evidence; Earlier Theories

Required Reading: Burton, *A Short Introduction to the Gospels*; Wright, *The Composition of the Four Gospels*; Burkitt, *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*; Harnack, *The Sayings of Jesus*.

In our previous study we considered the external evidence as to the origin of the Gospels. It was there intimated that greater importance had been attached in recent years to the testimony of the Gospels themselves as to their origin than to the statements of others. It is to this part of our course that we now address ourselves. What can the Gospels tell us of the process through which they came to be? Can they contribute to the solution of the question to which the external evidence still left us heirs?

There is no specific statement in the Gospels which solves for us the problem of their composition. The nearest approach to such a statement is the famous preface to the Gospel of Luke. This gives us a few indications of the process as concerns that writing, but it says nothing regarding Matthew or Mark. It states that as far as our Third Gospel is concerned the process of its becoming was through investigation and literary toil. But while it is true that the Gospels make no declaration of the way in which they came into being, it is also true that a comparison of our first three Gospels reveals not a little of the story. Even a cursory reading of these Gospels will serve to impress one with the fact that he reads in each one much similar material. A closer examination of this material will disclose the most striking similarities and even identities. The reader will also discover material in two of the Gospels which exhibits similarities and identities in like manner. Some sections will be found to appear in one Gospel only. A further investigation will reveal certain divergences. What do these contacts and departures mean? Clearly the similarities point to relationship, while the divergences indicate independence of some kind. Facts such as these, which are easily discoverable by any reader of the Gospels, have given rise to the question which is known as the synoptic problem. It is to this problem that we turn our attention for the next two months. The earlier theories of the problem form the subject of our reading in this part of the course.

The first volume on our list, Burton's *A Short Introduction to the Gospels*, will repay an entire reading, but it appears in this course because of chap. iv, "The Relation of the Synoptic Gospels to One Another." The majority of the works on the synoptic problem seem to assume on the part of their readers a knowledge of the elements of the problem sufficient to enable them to follow discussions of a technical character upon special points. Frequently the readers do not possess such knowledge and are, therefore, in no position to appreciate the excellent discussions in the volumes before them. Because of the prime importance of possessing a clear understanding of the various factors that compel the consideration of the problem, the chapter before us has been selected for study. It is admirably adapted for the purpose indicated.

The use of the term "synoptic" as applied to the first three Gospels is due to the fact that these Gospels present in so large a degree the same view of the occurrences of the life of Jesus. The elements of the problem are five in number, according to the author. The first of these is the similarity of these Gospels to one another. Generally speaking, they have the same historical framework for the public activity of Jesus. Within this framework there is a most remarkable sameness of events recorded, especially in view of the fact that there has been preserved for us only a fragment of the activities and sayings of Jesus during his public career. The order in which these events are recorded is quite similar, and the verbal resemblances of these records are very close. The similarities are well illustrated in the chapter. The second element is the difference between these Gospels. Each Gospel is distinct as to specific purpose, and some events recorded in common are changed to meet such purpose. Occasionally one finds accounts of the same event which are independent, while in each Gospel there are omissions and additions as compared with the others. The preface of Luke constitutes the third element in the problem. The analysis of this preface by the author will be found instructive. A fourth element is found in the statements of early Christian writers, notably those of Papias. The final factor lies in the literary method of the age, two features of which must be noted: the preservation of material by oral transmission for a considerable period of time, and the construction of books by placing already existing documents together.

A brief statement of the theories which have been proposed for the problem thus forced upon us is presented. The first is that of a common document from which all of the first three Gospels drew. This failed to account for the differences between them, and in an attempt to meet this difficulty different recensions in increasing numbers were posited until the theory failed under its own weight. Another theory is that of an oral Gospel from which our synoptic writers drew directly. This theory has done good service in calling attention to oral tradition, but as a direct source of our present Gospels it fails to explain the close resemblances. A third theory, or group of theories, is that which assumes the use of a document or documents plus the interdependence of our Synoptic Gospels. This type of theory varies not a little in details. With some the Hebrew Matthew is the oldest document and it in turn was used by Mark. These two documents gave rise to our Greek Matthew, which, with Mark, went to produce our present Gospel of Luke. Others find the sources of our Gospels to be two: Mark, which is an independent work, used both by Matthew and by Luke; and a document

which some regard as the original Matthew, also used in common by the writers of the First and Third Gospels. This is known as the "two-document theory."

A section noting a number of salient facts regarding the material common to two or more of the synoptists, or peculiar to one, is followed by a statement of general conclusions which set forth the positions which may be said to receive fairly common assent. It is important for a clear apprehension of the whole problem that the basal facts so clearly stated in brief form should be held firmly in mind. The author's statements are easily checked by an appeal to the gospel records themselves, and such a discipline is of the first value.

The second work assigned for reading is Wright's *The Composition of the Four Gospels*. This is a presentation of the oral theory as the solution of the question of gospel origin. The chapters were written on a sea voyage when the author was deprived of literary facilities. This circumstance may account for the somewhat vagrant style of the volume. In spite of this tendency to wander, the main thesis of the book is fairly clear. Mr. Wright devotes a considerable portion of his discussion to the work of the catechists, who occupied, in his opinion, a place of much greater influence and importance than is usually assigned to them. Their number was quite large and the church at Jerusalem was the source of supply for a considerable period. Some of them were probably itinerants while others accompanied the great missionaries of the church on their tours. These missionaries also left catechists to instruct the churches which they had founded. It is rather surprising to find our author stating that Paul "drew his supply of evangelists and catechists from the energetic proselytising church at Jerusalem, or his converts would not so soon have been tinged with Judaism."

The method of instruction followed by the catechists was the memoriter. The various lessons were repeated until they were retained firmly in the mind. One of these catechists was Mark, who had learned gospel memoirs from Peter. From this Petrine instruction of Mark we have a first cycle of oral tradition which represents the teaching which Peter was able to give in Jerusalem up to the time when he became *persona non grata* to the church in that city and took his departure. This oral instruction was written in Greek by Mark, although he must have learned it in Aramaic from Peter. It was not to be expected that the scholar writing later and in another language should produce with absolute fidelity the teachings of his master, but, as it is, this reproduction forms a document of the highest value. Three editions, each nearly complete, of Peter's memoirs have been preserved for us, one in each of the first three Gospels.

A second cycle of oral tradition has for its immediate source the recollections and instruction of Matthew. His teaching, in Aramaic, was at first given to an inner circle of advanced students. He came to the front in Jerusalem after Peter had left, and he probably superintended the catechists there. While he was completing this second cycle the demand for catechists sent some of them out with the first cycle and part of the second. Later Matthew himself went to labor in the east and there, with the assistance of a catechist, wrote the Aramaic Gospel, the distinctive feature of which was this second cycle of oral tradition. After the destruction of Jerusalem a Greek catechist probably went to Matthew for consolation and was instructed by him to write a Greek Gospel. Either this was the procedure or such a catechist wrote the Gospel under direct prompting from the

Holy Spirit. In any case it would be the Gospel according to Matthew. It contains an edition of the first cycle and also the second cycle of oral tradition.

The demand for Christ's teaching rather than his acts produced a third cycle of oral narrative. The compiler of this is unknown, but it was in Greek from the beginning. It originated in the Pauline church and the catechists communicated it to Luke, who is the sole preserver of it.

The first of these groups of oral teaching was compiled about twelve years after Jesus left this world, and the second and third within the following twelve years. The Gospels as we have them were written within the years 71-80 A.D., Mark using the first cycle, Matthew the first and second, and Luke the first, second, and third. In addition to these oral sources there are a few oral traditions which existed outside the three cycles. The single written source is the first two chapters of Luke. All these sources are utilized by editors who do not scruple to add notes of their own.

Thus is the story of the origin of the Synoptic Gospels told by Mr. Wright. He has done valuable service in emphasizing the manifest use of sources by our gospel writers and in calling attention to the part played by oral tradition in the preservation and transmission of the records of the words and deeds of Jesus. That there was a period when they were only in oral form seems indisputable. To the men who so preserved them we are always grateful. But it is by no means so clear that oral tradition took on the definite form which our author ascribes to it. The facts are not so easy as his discussion intimates. The volume is characterized by a tendency which does not add to the accuracy or scholarly value of the work. It is the frequently charming but nearly always unrestrained use of the imagination in reconstructing the situation and the process. Historical imagination is valuable, in fact it is indispensable, but taken alone it is a precarious foundation for argument and statement. The catechists are made to carry burdens grievous to be borne. So much depends on the catechetical argument and so much of that argument is based on assumption or inference that is scarcely warranted, that the whole structure is in danger of collapse. The divergences of the first three Gospels could be admirably explained by the theory of direct oral sources, but it has a desperate task on its hands to explain the double and triple verbal coincidences which exist. The theory rendered good service in some respects; it failed because of the inadequacy of its attempted explanation.

*The Gospel History and Its Transmission*, by F. C. Burkitt, is a thoughtful and penetrating work in which the Gospels are subjected to a close scrutiny in an attempt to discover the process by which they came into being. It has been selected in this course as an excellent representation of that modern gospel study which sees in the immediate sources of our first three Gospels documents and not oral tradition. A careful comparison of these Gospels leads the author to believe that the principal common source is a single written document. This document is stated to be the Gospel of Mark "much as it has come down to us." The theory of an "Ur-Marcus," or original Mark, which lay behind our three Gospels is not favorably considered. Judged by the criteria of self-consistency and consistency with the known political and social conditions of the day, the Gospel of Mark is found to have high historical quality and in it we come nearer to the actual scenes of the Lord's life than in any other document. The other

Gospels are interpretations of Jesus' life and as such do not possess the factual value of Mark.

The Third Gospel is but part of a designed larger work, one other portion of which has come down to us, the Acts of the Apostles. The author of the Third Gospel is the same as the author of the Book of Acts, who in turn is identical with the author of the travel diary which is one of the sources of that book. The date of this Gospel is placed about 100 A.D., this conclusion being based upon a comparison of Acts and Luke with the writings of Josephus. There will be some who will not be convinced by this part of the discussion. The sources of the Gospel of Luke are the Gospel of Mark and, with high probability, the "so-called Logia Document." The author was not an eyewitness of the events recorded, but a companion of Paul in the later years of his missionary activity.

The Gospel of Matthew is uncertain as to date and author, but we are certain that its chief source was our Gospel of Mark. A second source, consisting in the main of teachings of Jesus, was used by him in common with Luke. Not a few identify this document with the Logia of Matthew made famous by the reference of Papias. The writers of the First and Third Gospels do not use their materials in a slavish way, but react on them, Matthew freely recasting and amending the order and interpolating in the Markan frame, while Luke is more conservative in this respect. Matthew, however, omits very little of Mark, while Luke has a few notable omissions and departures. Mr. Burkitt rightly dissents from the suggestion that double or triple tradition necessarily implies better attestation. These may be only repetitions of a single witness. The only real double attestation is that of a few passages which are found both in Mark and in the other common source of Matthew and Luke. These doubly attested sayings contain the teaching of Jesus which made the greatest impression upon his followers. A chapter on "The Gospel in Matthew and Luke" is worthy of careful reading, although little for our specific problem is added, nor does the discussion of the Fourth Gospel concern us here.

The volume is deserving of most careful study. The fine spirit and scholarly ability of the writer make it a pleasure to follow his argument. Many of his results will find general acceptance, especially his treatment of Mark and of the value of the Gospels. The matter of a single common source from which Matthew and Luke drew the greater part of their non-Markan material will not commend itself to all. The phenomena of identity, similarity, and divergence, both in word and in order in the parts of the First and Third Gospels not supplied by Mark, are so complex and intricate that it remains a grave question whether any single source that can reasonably be posited is adequate to explain them. If the source thus posited explains but a part of the non-Markan material, the solution is but a partial one. Nevertheless, Mr. Burkitt has placed us under great obligation for his clear and careful presentation of the hypothesis that two documents, our Mark and another, form the principal source-material for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

The fourth work assigned for this section is Harnack's *The Sayings of Jesus*. The reason for its appearance here is that it represents one of many attempts to reconstruct the second source of the two-document theory. Anything that this author writes is deserving of respectful consideration, although there are not

wanting those who think that he has appeared to greater advantage elsewhere than in his distinctively New Testament work. But this volume will serve excellently to introduce the reader to the immense amount of detailed work which has been done by scholars in their efforts to get back to the sources of our Gospels.

The non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke is of considerable extent and varies from substantial verbal identity through certain differences to a few cases where the divergence is so great as to cast doubt upon the hypothesis of a common immediate source. Taking the material, grouped according to the degree of difference, the author subjects the text to a careful and minute examination in order to ascertain whether Matthew or Luke has preserved the more original form. Matthew is found to be very conservative and the alterations which he has made on his source are few and unimportant. Luke, on the other hand, has dealt much more freely with his material, making many changes which are prompted chiefly by stylistic considerations. But while Matthew's account is the more original, it seems certain that one and the same text lay behind both evangelists.

From his detailed examination Harnack emerges with a common second source for our First and Third Gospels consisting of seven narratives, twelve parables, thirteen groups of sayings, and twenty-nine single sayings of greater or less extent. The document thus hypothetically reconstructed is decidedly more homogeneous than any of our three Gospels, a feature which is evidently considered an argument for its actual existence. Its habitat is Galilee and only once does its gaze wander beyond the limits of that land. An important difference between this source and our present Gospels is the entire absence from it of any reference to the Passion of Jesus. Thus it was not a Gospel, but a collection of sayings. There was, however, a fairly definite arrangement of subject-matter and at least a semblance of chronological order in the document. Compared with the Gospels it manifests a striking neutrality, the apologetic interests which characterize the former being quite lacking. The Christology is very simple, Jesus being the general title used; and the ethical teaching is informal. These marks of informality, neutrality, and simplicity point in the direction of an earlier date for this second source, designated as Q, than for Mark. It stands between the first formless attempts to fix the hitherto oral tradition in writing and the Gospels as they now appear. The necessity for its existence ceased when Matthew and Luke incorporated it, and it gradually passed from the scene.

Thus our author takes his place by the side of those who give allegiance to the "two-document theory" and bends the resources of his great scholarship to the task of recovering the lost source. He is convinced that the relationship between Matthew and Luke in their parallel non-Markan parts must be literary.

The document which Harnack gives to us is an interesting one, but it must remain quite hypothetical for the present. To obtain it he has occasional recourse to suspicious textual variants which he theoretically rejects. A more serious matter is the ignoring of the difference of context which many of the sections selected to compose his document have in Matthew and Luke. It may well be asked if this does not gravely impair his common source. Moreover, it is a possibility which must not be overlooked that material verbally identical might be

found in sources which contained much other material with certain verbal differences together with sections peculiar to the one or the other. The criteria for the reconstruction of this second source are too rigid. But even if one grant the reconstruction as alleged, it goes but a little distance in accounting for the non-Markan material and leaves unsolved some of the most subtle problems.

If one compares this work with others devoted to a like task, one will not fail to be impressed with two things: the delicacy of the whole undertaking and the divergence in results. But it is well to know how men have addressed, and are addressing, themselves to this specific part of the problem.

#### **Suggestions for Further Study**

1. Does the Gospel of Mark give evidence of having used literary sources previously existent?
2. The probability of small and disconnected portions of the oral tradition being first reduced to writing rather than large cycles. The effect of this upon subsequent documents. The possibility of the same fragment becoming incorporated in more than one document.